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ABSTRACT

A doctoral research study was conducted on the job-specific information and assistance needs of beginning principals and the types of induction strategies that helped or hindered their first year in the principalship. Study subjects consisted of all individuals appointed to their first principal position in Washington or Oregon public school districts during the 1988-89 school year. The study used (1) the responses of 50 elementary, 21 middle, and 24 high school beginning principals who returned a self-administered questionnaire and (2) the induction experiences of 20 responding principals participating in indepth interviews. Beginning principals reported a need for assistance and information on 44 of the 50 administrative tasks listed in the survey. Beginning elementary principals needed help with school finance and business management, organization and structure, instruction and curriculum development, and personnel. Middle and high school principals needed help with school-community relations and instruction and curriculum development. Induction practices hindering school leadership transitions included "sink or swim" approaches, unanticipated challenges and inherited changes, and inadequate performance feedback. Successful strategies included planned orientations to the district and the school, assignment of a veteran "buddy," performance feedback, and peer-group idea sharing. Eight recommendations are provided. (19 references) (MLH)

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OSSC REPORT

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Helping Beginning Principals Succeed

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Introduction

> Entry is a quintessential human situation, when "the hopes and fears of all the years" are again rekindled–when the dreams and visions of both the person entering and the organization inviting are aroused–when all the anxieties of facing the unknown are at their highest pitch–when one experiences the ritual of initiation into the mysteries of this particular tribe. (Tobert 1982)

Each year nearly 11,000 individuals enter a school in the United States as the new principal (Pharis and Zakariya 1979). And the vast majority of beginning principals experience two distinct emotions upon entry: first, excitement at having been selected for one of the most critical positions in America's schools; and second, anxiety about their ability to meet the demands of the job (Sosne 1982).

Unfortunately, professional literature on the first year of the principalship suggests that many rookies may experience a "sink-or-swim, learn-on-your-own" induction to the job that, in turn, increases their anxiety for fulfilling the job responsibilities of the principalship. Yet, little educational research exists regarding the entry-year needs of beginning principals and the types of induction strategies common in public schools that help or hinder first-year principals' transition to school leadership. Thus, to provide school officials with needed insight, a doctoral research study was conducted on the job-specific information and assistance needs of beginning principals and the induction practices that new principals believed helped or hindered their first year in the principalship.

The subjects of the study consisted of all individuals appointed to their first principal position in Washington or Oregon public school districts during the 1988-89 school year. The responses of 50 elementary, 21 middle, and 24 high school beginning principals who returned a self-administered survey

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questionnaire and the induction experiences of 20 responding principals who participated in indepth interviews were used for the analysis and findings of the study.

This article briefly summarizes some of the major findings of the study, beginning with surprises and impressions of the first year in the principalship. Next, administrative tasks on which beginning principals reported the greatest need for information and assistance are listed, followed by school district induction practices that beginning principals considered made their first year difficult. In conclusion, induction strategies that principals considered were needed or helpful are highlighted, followed by recommendations to improve school district induction practices.

I am indebted to many beginning principals in Washington and Oregon for sharing their time and insights into the needs and induction experiences of rookie principals. Without their openness and candor, I would not have gained many of the practical ideas shared in this article. In addition, my thanks to Dennis Arendt, a Eugene principal, for his able illustrations that capture the needs and emotions of the principal's first year.

Dr. Anderson, formerly a graduate research assistant with the Oregon School Study Council, is Director of Personnel Services in Mukilteo, Washington. This article is based on Anderson's dissertation, "Inducting Principals: A Study of the Job-Specific Information and Assistance Needs of Beginning Principals in Washington and Oregon." *Anderson is also the author of* Inducting Principals: How School Districts Help Beginners Succeed, *OSSC Bulletin, October 1988.*

Surprises and Impressions of the First Year

Overwhelming Demands. Many beginning principals were surprised at the time commitment and emotional demands of the principalship. Feelings of being overwhelmed and "sensory overload" were common entry experiences reported by principals. The time and energy required to learn a new job created a need for emotional support that new principals sought from families, friends, and colleagues. Furthermore, even when principals anticipated that the job would require a lot of time and emotional energy, they were surprised at how it would feel.

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Isolation. Not all, but many beginning principals felt isolated and found the principalship to be a lonely place. Part of this was due to the physical isolation from other colleagues. As one principal said, "This has got to be one of the loneliest jobs because when I was a v.p. you could go in and talk to the principal about a problem, you have someone to share it with. You just don't have it here [in the principal's chair]." Another aspect that contributed to feelings of loneliness was the reality that many decisions rest on the principal's shoulders. One principal noted, "The buck stops in my office. It's the old decision business. I'm it."

Rewarding. Although the principalship was demanding, many beginning principals found their new leadership position exciting, rewarding, and influential. "I love the job," "Each day is different and challenging," "I enjoy the principalship," "I love being the person who pushes the direction," "I am pumped up," "I feel like I can make a difference in the type of education boys and girls are provided" are only a few of the many comments made during interviews and stated on survey responses.

The Job-Specific Needs of Beginning Principals

For which administrative tasks do beginning principals need assistance and information? Beginning principals rated the extent of help that they needed on 50 administrative tasks for which principals are commonly responsible as follows: (a) vital need, (b) important need, (c) some need, and (d) no need. The 50 administrative tasks listed in the survey were incorporated under eight major task areas. Those eight areas were:

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Area 1—Instruction and Curriculum Development
Area 2—Staff Personnel
Area 3—Student Personnel
Area 4—School-Community Relations
Area 5—School Facilities
Area 6—School Transportation and Food Services
Area 7—Organization and Structure
Area 8—School Finance Business Management

As a group, beginning principals reported a need for assistance and information on 44 of the 50 tasks listed in the survey. And they reported a vital or important need for assistance and information on 21 administrative tasks, congregated under the major task areas of School Finance and Business Management, Organization and Structure, Instruction and Curriculum Development, and Staff Personnel. Principals reported some need for help in the School-Community Relations and School Facilities areas and, to a lesser degree, in Student Personnel. Finally, principals generally agreed on tasks for which little or no assistance was needed. Those tasks were congregated in the areas of School Transportation and Food Services and Student Personnel.

Differences among Elementary, Middle, and High School Principals' Needs for Assistance and Information

From the data gathered in response to the research question Do the needs for assistance and information differ among elementary, middle, and high schools?, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. Beginning principals, regardless of level, needed assistance and information on tasks in the major areas of School Finance and Business Management, Organization and Structure, Instruction and Curriculum Development, and Staff Personnel.

2. Middle and high school principals needed more assistance and information than elementary principals on tasks in the areas of School-Community Relations and Instruction and Curriculum Development. The interview data clarify why middle and high school principals may perceive a slightly greater need for help than elementary principals on tasks in the Instruction and Curriculum Development area. The data revealed that limited experience in leading the instructional program among some of the middle and high school interviewees, the challenge of bringing about change in secondary curriculum, and the diversity of the secondary school programs that secondary principals are responsible to lead created an important need for assistance and information.

On the other hand, many elementary interviewees had previous experience as curriculum specialists that created slightly less need for help in this area. Furthermore, elementary principals were familiar with most curricular aspects of elementary education from their experience as elementary teachers, whereas secondary principals found programs in their schools more diverse and specialized.

Finally, the importance of athletics in gaining community support and the central focus of middle and high schools within their entire communities were reasons that emerged from interviews explaining why secondary principals may perceive a greater need for help than elementary principals in the School Community Relations area.

3. Elementary, middle, and high school principals generally agreed on tasks for which little or no assistance and information were needed. Those tasks were congregated in the areas of School Transportation and Food Services and Student Personnel.

Table 1 presents the 21 tasks on which principals had the greatest need for help, rank ordered from highest to lowest.

School District Induction Practices That Made Principals' Transition to School Leadership Difficult

Sink or Swim, Learn on Your Own. Learning by trial and error was a major characteristic of school district induction practices that 57.7 percent of the principals experienced and that they considered made their transition to the principalship difficult. Many principals reported that they did not receive the assistance and information they wanted from veteran administrators on tasks for which they needed a great deal of help.

Unanticipated Challenges and Inherited Changes. Adding to the challenges of learning a new job, many principals faced taking over changes that were under way in their buildings or other ongoing site-specific challenges. And half of the principals were unaware of these changes or challenges when they were hired and were surprised upon beginning work. Thus, it complicated their first year and required them to spend a great deal of time and energy in learning the job.

Inadequate Feedback on Performance. Half of the principals considered a lack of feedback on their performance from superiors as a characteristic of school district induction practices that made their first year more difficult. Without formal feedback from superiors, principals were anxious, tentative, and uneasy as to how they were doing.

Induction Strategies That Beginning Principals Consider Are Needed or Helpful

Planned Orientations to the District and the School. A well-thought-out orientation by central office personnel to the district's goals, decision-making processes, expectations of principals, curricular programs, budgeting procedures, and district-specific procedures in all major task areas were induction strategies that principals considered were needed or helpful. Furthermore, principals wanted time lines and due dates made clear. The principals who experienced a well-planned orientation noted its purpose was to introduce new princi-

Table 1
Administrative Tasks on Which Beginning Principals Had a Vital or Important Need for Assistance and Information

Task	*Rank*
Plan and manage school budget	1
Understand "unwritten" rules, procedures, and expectations	2
Plan and direct improvements in curriculum and instruction	3
Understand district goals, philosophy, and expectations of principals	4
Orientation to and understanding of staff	5
Assess relevance of instruction, curriculum, and evaluate program outcomes	6
Understand and implement school board policies, district rules, and administrative procedures	7
Supervise accounting procedures for school monies	8
Understand curriculum content, objectives, and organization	9
Understand and work through district decision making processes	10
Assess community needs, problems, and expectations	11
Develop master schedule	12
Set goals and develop long-range plans	13
Supervise and evaluate staff	14
Deal with staff concerns and resolve conflicts	15
Help staff improve and plan staff development activities	16
Select, assign, and orient staff	17
Supervise and direct custodial services, maintenance of facilities and plant systems	18
Supervise special programs	19
Supervise purchasing procedures	20
Coordinate the opening and closing of school each year	21

pals to the persons who could answer specific questions as issues arose throughout the year, versus a "one-shot, rapid fire" orientation that would leave principals inundated and overwhelmed with too much new information.

Finally, principals considered a thorough orientation by the outgoing principal of the school as a needed induction strategy. New principals wanted this orientation to include information on building-specific procedures, information on staff strengths and weaknesses, identification of key community communicators, and insights about the local school community.

Assign a Veteran "Buddy." The assignment of a veteran district administrator to assist a new principal "learn the informal ropes" during the first year on the job was considered as a needed induction strategy by nearly three-fourths of the principals. Principals stated that a veteran principal's assistance was needed to provide technical advice on various tasks; to help them learn and understand the "unwritten" rules, procedures, and expectations in the district; and to have an experienced principal in whom they could confide and with whom they could discuss ideas and problems.

Feedback on Performance. Principals considered specific and frequent feedback on performance from their immediate supervisor as another needed induction strategy. Over half of the principals who did not receive as much feedback as they wanted believed that strategy would help them better gauge their performance and help to improve their actions. The principals who received helpful feedback were provided both formal and informal feedback throughout the year from their supervisors.

Peer-Group Idea Sharing. The facilitation of peer-group problem solving and idea sharing was a final school district induction strategy that 25 principals recommended. Three interviewees who experienced such peer interaction found it extremely beneficial in solving school-specific concerns; peer-group assistance also built a sense of collegiality and support among principals.

Recommendations to Improve School District Induction Practices

Too often, principals are tossed into the job without sufficient support from their superiors. Some, in fact, find that their performance is

> judged according to how little they bother the central office. Good superintendents, however, ensure that new principals are aware of the values, beliefs, and norms of the communities where they are assigned, and that they share the district's or supervisory body's aims and goals. Effective superiors, therefore, provide the guidance and technical support from experienced peers that will help new principals adjust and succeed. (U.S. Department of Education 1987)

Although the search for a principal ends when he or she is hired, the process of getting an outstanding principal is far from over. Selection is only part of the process; the other part is helping the beginning principal succeed and grow in the job after he or she is hired. Developing a well-thought-out process for inducting principals to their new leadership role is, therefore, an activity that hiring officials cannot afford to leave to chance or to take lightly. Instead, it is a process that school districts should view as a high priority (Anderson 1988).

To help guide school districts' principal induction efforts, several recommendations were identified in the study that hiring officials can use to assist beginning principals in their transition to school leadership. Although preservice leadership experiences were not the main focus or purpose of the study, the findings also provided implications for ways in which universities and school districts can improve training programs for aspiring school principals.

1. Develop course work and practicums for school budget planning and management. University faculty, in cooperation with veteran school practitioners, should develop and provide more practical, hands-on training for aspiring school principals in school budget planning and management. Although theoretical and philosophical overviews of federal, state, and district financial issues and budgeting schemes are important for principals to know, the realities of the first year in the principalship suggest that new principals need to understand how to interpret and use budget information provided by the district office in order to make building-budget expenditure decisions. Furthermore, aspiring principals must be provided with ideas and strategies for involving staff members in budget development.

2. Develop preservice induction activities. Universities and school districts should work cooperatively in designing and delivering a variety of other preservice leadership experiences for those individuals who show promise for and interest in a school principalship. University course work and practicums should emphasize conflict management skills, change strategies, and staff supervision and evaluation skills. This training should not only include conceptual and technical knowledge about leading adults, but also provide practicums and simulation exercises that enable aspirants to apply the theoretical knowledge of the university classroom to practical school situations dealing with real people in real schools.

Full-time internships and the assignment of teachers to various leadership roles within schools are appropriate ways to socialize teachers to the important dimensions of a principal's leadership role. Furthermore, school districts should recommend or even require that the duties of secondary vice principals include responsibility for supervising instructional and curricular aspects of a school, as opposed to only supervising the areas of student discipline or student activities.

3. Orient beginning principals to the district. Districts should provide newly hired principals with a comprehensive orientation to the district. This starts with the selection process when hiring officials must provide applicants with a clear understanding of the district, community, and supervisory body's goals and aims, as well as any challenges that a new principal may face when beginning work. Then, scheduled orientations with the business, transportation, maintenance, public relations, curriculum, and other important school system offices should all be included as part of a comprehensive orientation program that is spread out over a new principal's first year on the job. Furthermore, the purpose of initial orientations should be to familiarize the new principal with the persons who can answer questions as issues arise; it should not be scheduled in such a way that new principals are inundated with new information when beginning work.

4. Orient beginning principals to their schools. The outgoing principal of a school should recognize his or her professional responsibility to provide the needed assistance and information to a beginning principal and should work in concert with the district office to develop a well-thought-out plan for the new principal's entry experiences. The outgoing

principal needs to provide the beginning principal with specific information about building schedules and procedures, staff strengths and weaknesses, and local community leaders' and parents' expectations. And if the previous principal is not available for this type of site-specific orientation, district office supervisors and other principals in the district should provide the needed assistance and information to help a newcomer get the year started.

5. Institute a buddy system. School districts should pair successful veteran principals with rookies in a "buddy system" to help newcomers learn the "informal ropes" of a district. For outside appointees, assignment of a veteran will probably be necessary, but for inside candidates, hiring officials and the newcomers themselves should confer on who might be the best "buddy." The veteran principal should provide both technical and cultural-specific information and assistance, giving the new principal a needed understanding of the subtle signs, signals, and norms of the district that are vital for a rookie to "get things done."

6. Give beginning principals feedback. Districts should develop a system whereby beginning principals are provided with specific and constructive feedback on their performance. Principals' supervisors must make time to provide both formal and informal feedback to the principal throughout the year. Well-designed performance feedback systems are needed to counteract the tentativeness that appears to result from current practice.

7. Facilitate peer-group problem solving and idea sharing. Districts should bring together beginning principals in idea-sharing and problem-solving sessions with innovative practitioners to discuss beginners' experiences, to offer suggestions for handling specific problems, to share ideas for building-specific issues, and to expose newcomers to innovative practices. Districts that do not have a sufficient number of beginning principals to create such peer interaction should enter into cooperative arrangements with other districts.

8. Facilitate regional inservice. Districts, universities, professional associations, and other educational training institutes need to facilitate regional inservice opportunities for principals in the administrative task areas of school budget planning and management, teacher supervision and evaluation, conflict management, and leading instructional and curricular improvement efforts. Such inservice sessions should bring together successful veteran principals with beginners to share ideas and continue the training of beginning principals.

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